

Himyarite Monotheism

A.F.L. Beeston

Down to the beginning of the fourth century A.D. the religious forms of South Arabia were polytheistic. The inscriptions refer to a number of divinities simultaneously, and we have explicitly polytheistic expressions like "all gods and goddesses of the town".⁽¹⁾ But in the course of the fourth century a Himyarite dynasty—known to the Muslim writers as the *Tabābi'a*—extended its power over the whole of South Arabia, absorbing both the ancient Sabaean kingdom and its last surviving rival, Ḥaḍramawt.⁽²⁾ Alongside this political event, in the latter 4th century and thereafter through the 5th, a radical change comes over the religious formularies expressed in the texts. With two exceptions (to be discussed later), references to the pagan dieties of the ancient tradition disappear completely from the texts, and we find only mention of the one unique God, referred to either under the name *Rahman-an* "the Merciful" or simply as *'il-an* "God", to which is usually subjoined epithets such as "lord of heaven", "lord of heaven and earth" &c. These epithets may perhaps be to some extent a rejection of the pagan attitude which attributed to each of the various deities a strongly marked local character, often as the "lord" of such-and-such a temple.

In the early part of the sixth century a further change occurred. The Himyarite king Yūsuf (Dhū Nuwās of the Muslim tradition) was a Jew, and conducted the famous massacre of the Najrānite Christians; this was followed by an Ethiopian invasion in which he was killed. Thereafter, the inscriptions, insofar as they contain any religious formularies at all, are exclusively Christian and use phraseology in which *Rahmān* is used to designate the first person of the Christian trinity, and is accompanied by mention of either "Christ" or "his Messiah". But before the reign of Yūsuf, the texts contain no mention of Christ at all; the question thus arises, what was the nature of the montheistic *Rahmānist* cult which prevailed from the latter 4th century to the beginning of the 6th?

In the course of discussion, I. Shahid properly pointed out that a Christian document does not necessarily contain a reference to Christ, and he instanced the letter of Constantius to the Axumites, which—in spite of dealing with the banishment of the great theologian Athanasius—does not anywhere mention Christ. This is a valid argument when one is considering a single document; but when the whole series of 4th-5th century *Rahmānist* texts lack any mention of Christ, it surely becomes impossible to see them all as Christian. And if they are not all Christian, then there is no intrinsic reason for singling out one rather than another as Christian. J. Ryckmans, who did accept that one late-4th century king was a Christian, goes on to say that after him, "Christianity can have had very little foothold in Himyarite territory until the beginning of the 6th century".⁽³⁾

The essential motivation for the assumption of a Christian episode, even if brief, in the 4th century lies in an external source: the Byzantine historian Philostorgius' claim that somewhere about the middle of the century a missionary named Theophilus converted the Himyarite leader to Christianity, and induced him to build three churches, one at 'Adan, one at the Himyarite centre of Zafār, and one somewhere on the coast towards the east (possibly Cane, modern Ḥiṣṇ al-Ghurāb).

Now there is also a parallel Byzantine claim that just at the same period the Axumite king 'Ēzāna was converted to Christianity; but this must be regarded with some caution. We have long known of a Ge'ez inscription of 'Ēzāna, which is monotheistic, speaking of God as "lord of heaven" but without distinctively Christian characteristics and without mention of Christ:⁽⁴⁾ it is only recently that a Greek version of the same text has been discovered⁽⁵⁾, which uses a clearly Christian trinitarian formula, and this notable difference needs explanation. To me it seems that it must indicate that the king thought it politic, in order to strengthen his relations with Byzantium, to make a show of Christianity in face of the Greek-speaking world, but was at the same time unwilling to profess it wholeheartedly vis-a-vis his Ge'ez speaking subjects.

Of course, this has nothing to tell us about the king's private convictions; our documents are official public records, not autobiographies; in private, perhaps he did allow himself to be baptized, but the studious avoidance of mention of Christ in the Ge'ez text indicates that such mention would have been unacceptable to the great mass of native Axumites.⁽⁶⁾ All this is equally applicable to the situation of the Himyarite king, if, as I. Shahid has suggested and as I would agree, the situation on both sides of the Red Sea at this period is likely to have been similar. As for the building of the churches, their locations strongly suggest that they were principally intended for visiting foreign merchants, not for the native population.

All in all, I feel that one must concede that there are no positive indications whatever for pre-6th century Christianity in the heartlands of South Arabian culture; Najrān is a different matter, and I would not like to embark on a discussion of when Christianity first arrived there, but Najrān was almost certainly an Arabic-speaking area⁽⁷⁾ and did not belong to the Sabaeo-Himyarite sphere proper.⁽⁸⁾

An alternative hypothesis, that the Raḥmānist cult was Judaism, has found a good deal of favour. Here it must be said that there are indeed positive and direct evidences of a Jewish presence within the South Arabia area proper, well before the reign of Yūsuf. Easily the most striking inscription is **Bayt al-Ashwal 1**⁽⁹⁾, undated but probably from the early years of the 5th century; this has as author an unmistakeable Jew named Yahuda, who invokes, along with Raḥmān, "his community Israel" (though it is not altogether clear whether "his" refers to the author or to God). The word used for "community" is the common Sabaic one *sha'b*, which designates a collectivity of village communities and several of which go to make up a "nation"; it is also, like Arabic *ṭā'ifa*, used for professional groups. This suggests that the Jewish community was only one element in the population. At the end of the text, the author declares that the building activity which the text records enjoyed the approval and support of king Dhar'i'amar, and winds with aspirations for the prosperity of the royal house. W. W. Müller has taken this as evidence that the king was a Jew as well, which does not seem to me to be necessarily the case. Mediaeval Jewish communities in England and Rome enjoyed the particular patronage and protection of king and pope respectively, but neither king nor pope was a Jew. Nor, in my view, does the mention, in connection with the king, of a building called a *mkrb* imply this. Now in Ge'ez a synagogue is called a *mekwrab*, but this by derivation means only a "meeting house" or "place of assembly", and we ought not to infer that every "meeting house" was necessarily a synagogue (any more than in England where not every "meeting house" is necessarily a Quaker place of worship); the application of the word to a synagogue is simply a calque translation of the Greek word, which itself originally means only "assembly". Moreover, Glaser has recorded that in South Arabia he heard the term *mikrāb* applied to a heathen temple, and in Ge'ez the word is also used for the temple of Solomon as well as for a synagogue. Lastly, that *mkrb* in Yahuda's text refers to a synagogue seems to me excluded by the fact that it is said to possess a feature called "the king's *mknt*": the latter word had been used in the pagan period for the niche in a temple where the god's image stood, and in this monotheistic text seems most likely to refer to a niche or alcove where the king sat in the "place of assembly", which is an unlikely feature of a synagogue.

It is not surprising that we should encounter texts with a markedly Jewish flavour during the reign of the Jewish king Yūsuf. Among these, the most noteworthy is **Ry 508** from Kawkab in southern Najd (it is the record of a Himyarite military expedition), where God is referred to by the morphologically plural form *'lhn*, which is an obvious calque on the Hebrew Elohim.

But the number of texts which reveal themselves as Jewish by their phraseology is quite small, about one tenth of the total number of known Raḥmānist inscriptions. It does not seem to me safe to assume that all of them are Jewish. There is notable difference between the phraseology of the overtly Jewish texts and the rest with their very neutral colouring. It has indeed been argued that the term Raḥmān for the Deity is derived from the identical Talmudic term: but even if this is so, it does not prove that Raḥmānism was Judaism. In English 17th and 18th century literature it is quite common to find God referred to as Jehovah, with no implication at all that those who used the word are to be taken as Jews. There is some relevance here,

moreover, in the fact that several Palmyrene inscriptions refer to the supreme deity as *Rahmāna*. Of course, I would agree with I. Shahid that this is not likely to be a direct borrowing, for chronological reasons, since the Palmyrene empire was crushed by Rome some three quarters of a century before *Rahmānism* appears in the South Arabian texts. But if non-Jewish Palmyrenes could use such a term, why should non-Jewish Himyarites not do the same? To sum up here, we certainly have a very small number of inscriptions with a decidedly Jewish slant to their phraseology; but the great majority of the *Rahmānist* texts do not show this, and should not be automatically classed as Jewish, even if the Jewish presence in the area may have exercised some influence on the rest of the population. The latter possibility is in fact exactly what J. Ryckmans has envisaged when he wrote that 5th century *Rahmānism* was "either Judaism or of Jewish inspiration"⁽¹⁰⁾.

One other point needs mention, namely the Muslim tradition that the Himyarite king Abūkarib As'ad (attested epigraphically somewhere around 425 A.D.) was converted to Judaism, with all his people, by some learned men from Yathrib. But when one looks carefully at the story as told by Tabarī⁽¹¹⁾, it is striking that the narrative itself contains no explicit mention of Judaism, but only speaks of "their *dīn*"; it is only after the conclusion of the narrative that we get the obviously editorial comment, "This was the beginning of Judaism in Yaman". Obviously, Tabarī himself thought that Abūkarib and the Himyarites were converted to Judaism, but it is doubtful whether the original tradition envisaged anything more than what might be called "Jewish inspiration". Yet even if Abūkarib and his immediate circle were fully professing Jews, it still remains unproven that all succeeding kings from his reign down to that of Yūsuf, and all the other authors of *Rahmānist* inscriptions, should have been Jews.

If the main body of *Rahmānists* before the 6th century was monotheistic without being committed Jews or Christians, they can only have been what a Muslim would call *ḥunafā'*. The late H.A.R. Gibb, with his usual perceptiveness, has expressed the opinion that there must have been *ḥunafā'* in Arabia in the few centuries before Islam⁽¹²⁾; and the epigraphic evidence surveyed above seems to me to support this.

European scholars have long sought to see *ḥunafā'* as an arabicization of the Syriac term *ḥanpe*; the Arabic singular *ḥanīf* will then have been formed from the plural within the Arabic speech area (since the Syriac singular *ḥanpa* would sound almost undistinguishable from the plural to Arab ears), and probably well before Islam. The great difficulty in this has always been the startling difference in application of the two terms. The Syriac word is a term of abuse directed by Syrian Christians against non-Christians. Some have indeed tried to argue that the non-Christian population of Syria did include, specially among the educated classes, adherents of monotheistic forms of belief such as Neo-Platonism, Mithraism &c. While this is certainly true, there is no hint of any restriction of the term to such persons, and indeed the archetypal *ḥanpa* for Syrian Christians was the emperor Julian, whose policy it was to try to revive traditional Roman polytheism. The difficulty is however largely obviated if we assume that the term *ḥanīf* entered the Arabic language not directly from Syria, but by way of Najrān. The Najrānites must have been well aware that the Syrian missionaries called all non-Christians, whether polytheistic or monotheistic, *ḥanpe*, and have taken the word into their own vocabulary. Makkans of the 5th century, with their strong trading connections with Yaman, must have been aware that the wealthier classes there were almost overwhelmingly monotheistic, and it would thus have been easy for them to adopt the term *ḥanīf* (used by the Najrānites to designate their neighbours on the south) in the specific sense of monotheist, excluding the other applications which the term had in Syriac.

The rapidity and thoroughness of the change from traditional polytheism to monotheistic *Rahmānism* is surprising. One can hardly avoid thinking that polytheism, already in the 3rd century, must have begun to lose its hold on at least the upper classes. This is precisely parallel to contemporary developments in the Mediterranean world, of which Michael Grant writes,⁽¹³⁾ "Cults of the individual pagan deities began to fail during the third century A.D., such people increasingly thought of the Olympians as aspects of a single pagan divinity". South Arabian art forms mirror very closely those of the Mediterranean world, and it is only

to be expected that currents of thought should do the same; Grant's observation is most likely to be applicable to South Arabia as well.

Yet these considerations alone are hardly enough to explain the abruptness of the 4th century change to Raḥmānism. Official and popular cults commonly survive long after they have lost their appeal for thinking men. For instance, it was not until 495 A.D., nearly two centuries after the age of Constantine and more than a century after Christianity became the religion of the empire, that Pope Gelasius succeeded in suppressing the celebrating in Rome itself of the pagan festival of the Lupercalia. The widespread adoption of Raḥmānism should be attributed at least in part to political factors.

The ancient polytheistic cults had been intimately bound up with social and political structure. They were the expression of the self-identification of social groups, whether at the level of the clan, the tribe or the nation. The Sabaean deity Ilmūqah embodied the national consciousness of the Sabaean kingdom, and the other ancient kingdoms similarly had their own national deities. So long as Saba' retained, or could hope to retain, its separate independence, the maintenance of at least the outward forms of the Ilmūqah cult was vitally necessary for the maintenance of national morale. But when the Tūbba' dynasty was securely established in control of a dominion vastly greater than that of the older Sabaean kingdom, the retention of the external forms of the individual national cults became meaningless, and in fact harmful to the cause of forging a new South Arabian national consciousness transcending the older national boundaries. This, however, did not happen quite immediately on the establishment of the Ḥimyarite dynasty. The famous Shammar Yūhar'ish (Yur'ish) and his coregent father Yāsir were the first rulers of Saba' who claimed in addition to be kings of Ḥaḍramawt; yet in the same period, Yāsir was still waging war on native 'kings of Ḥaḍramawt'⁽¹⁴⁾, and Shammar (probably slightly later) was obliged to conciliate Ḥaḍramite nationalism by sending an embassy to attend the festival of the Ḥaḍramite national deity.⁽¹⁵⁾ In this phase, it was clearly in the interest of the Sabaean rulers to seek the support of traditional Sabaean nationalism through the medium of the Ilmūqah cult.

In the middle parts of the 4th century there appears to be a gap in our Sabaic-language sources, and it has sometimes been held that this is attributable to an Axumite intrusion into the South Arabian area, signaled by 'Ēzāna's use of the Sabaean royal title. If this assumption is valid, it would certainly furnish an excellent reason for the final collapse of Sabaean self-confidence and trust in the national deity Ilmūqah.

The picture presented above is, however, slightly over-simplified in some ways. Quite recently, we have gained knowledge of two texts which show a limited persistence of the older cults. **MAFY-Bani Zubayr 2**⁽¹⁶⁾ is dated right at the end of the 4th century A.D., and mentions a sanctuary of Ta'lab, the tribal deity of the Sam'ay folk in the Arḥab region; the location of the inscription is 4 km north of Jabal Ḍīn, in territory anciently connected with the Ta'lab cult and somewhat provincial in relation to the great centres at Ma'rib, Ṣan'a' and Zafār, and hence presumably a surviving pocket of ancient paganism.

The other inscription, **Gr 27**,⁽¹⁷⁾ is more puzzling. It is from Zafār, and records the reconstruction of a building "after it had been destroyed by the Ḥabashites". The palaeography, and the occurrence of the name Sharaḥbi'il (unattested in this form in the pre-Ḥimyaritic period), point to a fairly late date. Yet the last line, regrettably fragmentary, reads "... 'Athtar Shariqan and their god and ...". 'Athtar was the principal deity of the polytheistic pantheon, usually mentioned first in lists of deities invoked, and worshipped alike in all the ancient kingdoms. His appearance here raises problems which it is impossible to solve satisfactorily, specially in the absence of a full context.

With regard to Christianity before the reign of Yūsuf, it has to be said that there is a small group of rock inscriptions in the Yanbuq ravine, in the Wādī Ḥabbān, datable to the very beginning of the 6th century, i.e. probably in the time of Yūsuf's immediate predecessor; and one of these has a cross at the end. Whether

this can be taken as definitively Christian is perhaps not absolutely certain.⁽¹⁸⁾ If it is, however, it is not surprising, nor does it affect the general picture; by the beginning of the 6th century Christianity was certainly established in Najrān, and external sources mention Ḥaḍramawt along with Najrān as centres of Christianity.

Finally, I must say a few words about a topic with which I began my paper as delivered at the Symposium, and which caused difficulty to Jamme. The suggestion which I made was that there are some tendencies visible already before the 4th century which may have to some extent paved the way for monotheism; by this I meant tendencies towards what has been called henotheism, namely, the view that one god is entitled to the special worship of a particular individual or group, without any denial that other deities exist. In citing the Sam'ay cult of Ta'lab as an example of this, I certainly never intended to suggest that Sam'ay was unique in this respect, nor that a henotheistic attitude was universal even in Sam'ay. Both there and in other social groups, dedications, expressions of thanks, and petitions for favour may be addressed to one deity or to more than one; but a great majority of texts conclude with a final invocation, "by" one or more deities, and it is indeed rare for a Sam'ay text to have a final invocation by more than Ta'lab alone.

Notes

- (1) *E.g. Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique* 2693/6.
- (2) The kingdom of Qatabān seems to have disappeared from the political map somewhat earlier.
- (3) *Le Christianisme en Arabie du Sud préislamique* (Acc. naz. dei Lincei, anno 361, Atti del Convegno internaz. sul tema L'Oriente crist. Roma 1964), 426.
- (4) *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition* no. 11.
- (5) M. Rodinson, *Annuaire de l'école pratique des hautes études*, IVe section, (Rapports sur les conférences éth. et sudar. (1970/1)), 162.
- (6) I. Shahid rightly remarked, in connection with the letter of Constantius, that in interdenominational exchanges it is common to avoid points of difference and concentrate on what is common ground.
- (7) Irfan Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran, New Documents* (Bruxelles, 1971), 242 ff.
- (8) The occurrence of graffiti and short inscriptions in this area in South Arabian script does not show that the area belonged to the South Arabian culture proper: the script was widely used in areas adjacent to, but not part of, that culture, as for example at *Qarya* (al-Faw) and on the Gulf Coast.
- (9) R. Degan and W.W. Müller, *Eine hebräisch-sabäische Bilinguis* (*Neue Ephemeris für sem. Epigraphik*, 2, 1974), 118 ff.
- (10) *Op. cit.*, 439.
- (11) *Ta'riḫh*, (ed. de Goeje), i. 905.
- (12) "Pre-Islamic monotheism in Arabia", *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962), 269-80.

- (13) *The Roman Forum* (London, 1970), 58.
- (14) A. Jamme, *Sabaeen Inscriptions from Mahram Bilqis* (Baltimore, 1962), no. 665.
- (15) M. al-Iryānī, *Fī ta'riḫ al-Yaman* (San'ā', 1973), 184.
- (16) Chr. Robin, 'Le pays de Hamdan' (unpublished thesis, Paris 1977), 395.
- (17) Yuzhnaya Araviya, *Pamyatniki drevnei istorii i kulturi 1* (Moskva 1978), 37.
- (18) My attention to this text has been drawn by Chr. Robin. The cross has been used for decorative or symbolic purposes in many places in the world with no Christian associations; and its adoption as a distinctively Christian symbol is relatively late, and not found in the earliest centuries of Christianity.